

WELCOME TO
TRIUMPH

BRITTANY KOOI
KENDRA JOYNER MILLER



Copyright ©2023 Brittany Kooi and Kendra Joyner Miller

All rights reserved. For permission to reuse content, please contact
Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA
01923, (978) 750-8400, www.copyright.com.

Print: 9780827235588

EPUB: 9780827235595

EPDF: 9780827235601

ChalicePress.com

Printed in the United States of America

*For the ones who've gone before us, especially B., Ingrid, Marion,
the Sabbath Sisters, Shawna, & Trudy, the ones who walk alongside us,
and those who'll come after.*

Table of Contents

Preface	ix
Chapter 1: Starting on the Wrong Foot	1
Chapter 2: Triumphant Arrivals	14
Chapter 3: Family Time	25
Chapter 4: Tendrils of Friendship	33
Chapter 5: Memory Lane	47
Chapter 6: Running into Trouble	55
Chapter 7: Crash and Burn	66
Chapter 8: The Devil's Workshop	77
Chapter 9: All Your Glory	85
Chapter 10: A Good Day's Work	95
Chapter 11: Hot Night in the Old Town	103
Chapter 12: We All Fall Down	119
Chapter 13: Johnny on the Spot	128
Chapter 14: God Bless Triumph	138
Chapter 15: Rocket's Red Glare	151
Chapter 16: Get By with a Little Help from My Friends	162
Chapter 17: We Need to Talk	174

Chapter 18: It Will All Be Better in the Morning	185
Chapter 19: The Nights We Remember	191
Chapter 20: Great Expectations	197
Chapter 21: The Kids Are Alright	207
Chapter 22: Down the Rabbit Hole	213
Chapter 23: Pushing the Limits	228
Chapter 24: The People We Love	240
Chapter 25: Cliff Hanger	247
Epilogue	257

Preface

“Go ahead, say it.” Hana reached across the console and poked the lump of her son. Next to her, the blob curled within himself and groaned.

“Say what?” Johnny Tae grumbled, righting himself and raising his passenger seat from its prone position. He threw off the hood of his black sweatshirt.

“Are we there yet?” Hana mimicked. Her voice rumbled, “Are we there yet? It’s only what you used to ask every ten minutes when you were little, Johnny.” She reached out to tousle his hair.

Before her pink lacquered nails made contact, he retreated to the passenger window. He leaned against it and glared at her from the corners of his eyes.

“Cut it out,” he said, almost spitting the words.

Hana pretended he was referring to her imitation of him. She tapped the SUV’s navigation screen with her aimless finger. “Oh Johnny, I’m just trying to get you excited!”

“Mom, it’s Johnny Tae. I’ve told you: Everyone’s ‘John.’ Little boys are ‘Johnny.’ But I’m Johnny Tae. You might be able to throw away our culture, but I won’t.”

It was Hana’s turn to lean away, into her own side window. She propped an arm on the windowsill and rested her head on her fingers. Sighing, she conceded, “Fine. Johnny Tae. Whatever and whoever you are. Did you read the last sign?”

Her son looked out the windshield. “No, Mom, how could I? I was sleeping. Can you read with your eyes closed? Is that some magic power I didn’t know we had? Another secret you’ve been keeping from me?”

Silence echoed in the car, the high whirl of the tires the heartbeat of the moment.

A green sign stood alone on the side of the road. Pointing to it, Johnny Tae read aloud, “Welcome to Triumph County.”

Hana flicked the blinker, directing the car to the next exit. “That’s what I was trying to tell you, baby—we’re here.”

Starting on the Wrong Foot

T*he start of anything can feel impossible.* Ara Grace turned off her engine and checked her nerves. She breathed slowly. In and out. In and out.

She glanced at herself in the rearview mirror. Did she look like a pastor? She gazed at her partial rectangular reflection; she didn't know what that even meant. *How does someone look like a pastor?* she wondered, taking one last, deep breath.

“God called me here.” She breathed out into the quiet of her car as she prepared to open the door. Her voice wavered, almost as much as her spirit. If only she could believe those words and trust the calling God had placed on her life. God's gentle nudging had been faithful. There had been no burning bush or descending doves, but there had been a continual affirmation, when she decided to go to seminary, when she felt pulled to congregational ministry, and now this moment—her first call as a pastor. Ara Grace had never imagined she would end up at a church in a small town in the middle of nowhere. But who was she to question God's call?

As she reached for the handle, another kind of call illuminated the phone on her dashboard.

“Dear God,” she groaned, a petition for patience more than prayer. She pressed the receive button. “Hi, Hana.”

“Siiiiiiiister!” the excited voice chirped through the car's speakers. Hana always spoke as if they hadn't talked in ages. In all honesty, though, they hadn't *really* talked in ages. Their conversations were often one-sided, more monologue than dialogue. Hana would lay out some great plan or the latest tragedy of her life in hour-long

diatribes while Ara Grace pretended to listen. The only replies her sister needed to keep going were the occasional, “oh,” “wow,” or “umhm.” Their mother’s voice echoed in Ara Grace’s mind, “With Hana there’s always something!” Often Ara Grace was the one left cleaning the *something* up.

“Guess where I’m headed?” Hana’s voice crooned across the miles.

“Hana, I’m sorry but I’m about to head to a work ...”

“On the way to you, of course! How could you make this big move without family to help welcome you and warm your new home?”

The last person I want to warm my house is you. You’re more likely to burn it to the ground.

“Yeah, we should be there tomorrow sometime, Ara.”

Dear God, give me strength. “Wait! Hana ... first of all, tomorrow is Sunday. I have a church service to lead. Remember, I’m new here and don’t have the time to be your tour guide.” Ara Grace took a deep breath, she could feel her temper flare. Hana always had that effect, “And second, who is ‘we’?”

“Well, Johnny had a little situation, and we thought it would be great for him to come, too. You know, see the sights, change of scenery, all that. Hang out with his favorite auntie.” Ara Grace almost laughed: She was Johnny Tae’s only aunt, but it should be expected that Hana would flatter her way into getting what she wanted.

“It’s not my idea of a good time, trust me,” a disgruntled voice barked. Ara Grace easily pictured her nephew in the passenger seat, arms crossed, scowl etched across his face. If there was anyone on this planet who was more disappointed in her sister than she was, it was Johnny Tae. As a boy, he would sweetly nestle his hand in her own as they visited the park or she picked him up in response to another, “Oops, I forgot!” call from Hana, or, worse, the school receptionist.

It had been years since they’d lived in the same city. Ara Grace went off to college and then seminary, leaving Hana’s craziness behind but also—she now realized—Johnny Tae. And on each holiday and vacation since, he seemed less the sweet child she knew and more the cold, sullen teen of today. Their long conversations faded into nothing more than single word responses, head nods, and shoulder shrugs. She couldn’t blame him for this act of self-preservation. She knew, with Hana, you to guard their heart in any way you could, and

Ara Grace knew this was Johnny Tae's way. That and probably the developmentally appropriate teenage angst.

"Anyway, service is terrible out here." Her sister's garbled, underwater sounding voice called her back from the memories. "How do these people even live.? ... See you soon."

Then, nothing.

Silence.

Typical Hana: a whirlwind of energy and excitement followed by emptiness. Like a pied piper, she drew folks to her with that smile, and how she would throw her head back and laugh with her entire body. People changed in Hana's presence. They believed things were possible, extraordinary. They believed *they* were extraordinary. Even as a little girl, Hana had this way of making everyone in the room believe whatever was happening in the moment was the most important thing in the world. But time and again, Ara Grace followed Hana to the cliffs of disaster and disappointment, cleaning up all that her sister left in her wake, making apologies and amends, trying herself not to fall off the edge. Hana never stayed in anything for a long time. Her mercurial nature changed like lightning, always off to whatever was next, the next adventure, the next relationship to fully throw herself into.

Leaving in her wake a sad trail—the broken hearts of the left behind, abandoned, forgotten, and replaceable.

And now the whirlwind was coming here, to Triumph County.

Ara Grace barely knew where she was. She looked out her car window. Like some Norman Rockwell painting, the whole of Triumph County seemed to have converged here on the town center. Red, white, and blue bunting hung from the picnic pavilions, children chased each other, darting in and out between parents' legs as the adults talked. Ara Grace tore her gaze from the idyllic scene and stared into her lap, breathing deeply once more. In and out. In and out.

A knock on the window made her jump.

"Gonna be late, Pastor."

Richard Lansington stood next to her car, hands shoved deep in his khaki pockets. "No one likes to be kept waiting," he chided in a voice fit for correcting a naughty child.

Of course. Richard, head of her church finance committee, *would* find Ara Grace running late. The man had spent time earlier that